

Down the Slippery Slope

Three Essays on American Writers

by

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Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*—the Thirteenth Character

Nineteen-ninety-six marked the centenary of John Dos Passos' birth. Moreover, it marked the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Big Money*, the third volume of his remarkable trilogy *U.S.A.*, which included the earlier *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932). And on August 5, 1996, the *New Yorker* published an article called "U.S.A. Today," by the essayist Joseph Epstein. There he gave Dos Passos credit for awakening him to politics but declared that the novelist was for his own time, and would not endure—ironically, the *New Yorker* never published anything by Dos Passos during his own time. Dos Passos' characters "did not stick," Epstein wrote. Today, he added, academia determines whether or not an author will continue to be read. But there is no newsletter for Dos Passos scholarship, nor are there successive editions of less and less significant material by him. He has descended—"poof!—down the history hole."

Wasn't that where Melville descended—poof!—not long after he published *Moby Dick*?

Like Epstein, I shall speak almost entirely about *U.S.A.* To give it full attention, I shall omit any discussion of Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), his essayistic travel books *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) and *Orient Express* (1927), and other important books by him.

U.S.A. is an astonishing work for many reasons. It has a dozen major characters—all of whom have stuck in my mind since my first reading. We get to know the twelve better than the people in our own lives. Though the narratives about these characters are often not contiguous, they give us virtual case histories. Or rather they do so when supplemented by the narratives about other major characters whose lives impinge on theirs.

U.S.A. also has a thirteenth character, who sticks like Krazy Glue. But more of this later.

Of the twelve major characters, four live in the shadow of another, a smooth, hollow opportunist named J. Ward Moorehouse. We follow his life from birth—some years before Dos Passos' own—through his creating a pioneering public relations firm in New York City before World War I, his becoming a dominant figure in his field, and his suffering a heart attack in middle age. Around him are his worshipful secretary, Janey Williams; his friend Eleanor Stoddard, a socially ambitious interior decorator, as opportunistic as Moorehouse himself; Eleanor's friend Evelyn Hutchins, who becomes known for her parties, attended by "interesting people"—writers, labor leaders, radical leftists, celebrities, etc.; and Richard

Ellsworth Savage, a Harvard-educated associate in Moorehouse's firm, who once held literary and pacifist ideals.

The other seven major characters are "Daughter," a young Texan who has an affair with Savage in France during the war, and gets a brush-off from him after she becomes pregnant; the merchant seaman Joe Williams, Janey's brother; Mac, an I.W.W. member, most of whose story is told in the first seven narrative sections of *The 42nd Parallel*; Ben Compton and Mary French, two left-radical characters, he the son of a Jewish watchmaker in Brooklyn, and she the daughter of a physician in Colorado; Charley Anderson, a midwestern mechanic who becomes a decorated airman during the war and then goes to work in the airplane manufacturing business; and Margo Dowling, an actress.

The life of the seaman Joe Williams is a naturalistic novelette as well as a case history. A reader may speculate on how Joe is affected by the frequent beatings he receives from his father. His death, in the second volume, is due to his combativeness as well as to the anti-black prejudice instilled in him at home. And the reader may link his miserable career to his having to leave high school at the end of his freshman year. Joe is a simple man who lacks smarts. It is painful to find him returning from a sea voyage with gifts for Janey (who completed high school, taking the commercial course, and now works for Moorehouse), and her not asking him up to the apartment she shares with friends, lest she be declassed by her brother's rough appearance.

Charley Anderson's story, told in one narrative section of *The 42nd Parallel* and seven sections of *The Big Money*, is another naturalistic novelette. A war hero and a mechanic who can help design airplanes, Charley is in a position to go after great wealth after the war. Joining an aircraft manufacturing corporation in Detroit, he finds himself drawn into stock manipulation—"competing against the sharks," to use a later phrase—and that competition, sexual frustration in his marriage, and heavy drinking lead to his deterioration, and finally his death in an automobile accident.

While the stories of Joe Williams and Charley Anderson are naturalistic novelettes, that of Margo Dowling, told in five sections of *The Big Money*, is a picaresque one. Margo lives by her wits as her life alternates between good and bad fortune. Her mother died giving birth to her, and she was brought up in New York by her mother's friend Agnes, who married Margo's father. When he becomes a hopeless alcoholic and the family is impoverished, Agnes sets up housekeeping with an actor, who gets Margo a job in vaudeville when she is a child, and rapes her when she is pubescent. Margo, after having willing sex with two other men, induces a young Cuban guitarist to marry her, and goes to Havana with him. He turns out to be a homosexual, and besides gives her syphilis, and a baby who is born blind and

dies. Escaping from her husband, with the aid of a young U.S. consular clerk—to whom she probably gives syphilis in turn—she goes back to New York, and there gets a job as a chorus girl in the Ziegfield Follies. She next comes close to marrying a rich Yale undergraduate, with whom she cruises to Florida. When the relationship ends abruptly, she lives with Charley Anderson, whom she has met there. Soon after his death, she and Agnes—and Margo's husband, for whom she has sent—drive from Miami to Los Angeles. After three years of playing bit parts in the movies, she encounters Sam Margolies, a director, who became infatuated with her when she was a model he photographed in a dress shop. He makes her a movie star and marries her.

Much of the Margo Dowling and Charley Anderson stories are told in nearby and often successive chapters of *The Big Money*, and we view Charley from Margo's perspective and Margo from Charley's. Similar multiple perspectives exist among other characters. Double visions—from within a given character, evidenced in the very vocabulary of the prose depicting him or her, and then from without, in the minds of other characters, in their own narrative sections—contribute to the brilliance and depth of *U.S.A.*

Interspersed amid the sections on the lives of the twelve major fictional characters, we get sections of three literary devices: "Newsreel," consisting of newspaper headlines, bits of newspaper stories, advertisements, and lyrics from popular songs of the time; "The Camera Eye," incidents from Dos Passos' life, which he narrates in an impressionistic manner; and short non-fictional biographies, often in free verse, of important figures of the era. Altogether there sixty-seven chapters of "Newsreel," fifty-one of "The Camera Eye," and twenty-seven biographies.

These serve as choral accompaniments to the stories of the twelve major fictional characters. Thus Charley Anderson's career in *The Big Money* has as accompaniments biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor—the industrial efficiency expert—, Henry Ford, Thorstein Veblen—author of *The Engineers and the Price System*—and Wilbur and Orville Wright.

U.S.A. is endlessly rich. Our twelve fictional characters live in a complex social medium—exemplified by the biographies and the "Newsreels"—and they, like the author of "The Camera Eye," are shaping their personal characters and fates every day. Juxtapositions, both within sections (narrative or auxiliary) and from section to section, produce much of the power and meaning of the trilogy.

The trilogy is an extraordinarily energetic work, its energy being due partly to these juxtapositions. But its energy is due at least as much to the language, which is most spectacular in the biographies.

Can one forget the tribute to Senator Robert La Follette for his stand in the U.S. Senate in 1917?

He was one of “the little group of willful men expressing no opinion but their own” who stood out against Woodrow Wilson’s armed ship bill that made war with Germany certain; they called it a filibuster, but it was six men with nerve straining to hold back a crazy steamroller with their bare hands...

In a book review that Dos Passos wrote in college, “Conrad’s *Lord Jim*,” he declared that Conrad’s novels furnish “mental grindstone.” This is certainly true of his own *U.S.A.* As with most great works of fiction, what you find in the trilogy depends very much on the intellect, background, experience, and imagination you bring to it.

An example of such reader-writer interdependence may be found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “John Dos Passos and *1919*” (1938), an analysis of Dos Passos’ narrative style. It stresses his mechanical rendering of his characters’ words and deeds, and links the resultant portrayals to the way in which capitalist society affects the characters’ behavior. Sartre closes with the unequivocal statement: “I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time.”

Sometimes the most important fact about a situation or experience—here I am concerned with literary experience—is so pervasive that we overlook it. I think that this is the situation with Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* I have described the twelve major individual characters. But the most important character in the trilogy is not Moorehouse or Mary French or Charley Anderson, etc. Rather it is the one that sticks like Krazy Glue once we think of it as a character—the United States of America. This is true in the same sense that the most important character in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is not Gulliver, but mankind. As Americans watch the twelve major human characters live out their lives, they may be so accustomed to the country which these characters inhabit that they lose sight of it as a subject.

We begin with the size of the country, almost half a continent. The same kind of novel could not be written about Holland. Mac, the first fictional character we encounter, grows up in Middletown (Connecticut), and Chicago. Leaving his uncle in Chicago and setting out to make his own way in life, he travels from Saginaw, Michigan, to Seattle (by way of Winnipeg, Banff, and Vancouver, in Canada), then to Portland, San Francisco, Goldfield (Nevada), San Diego, Los Angeles, Yuma (Arizona) and El Paso, before he crosses into Juarez, in Mexico. In Portland, while hopping a freight train, he misses his footing and becomes separated from Ike Hall, a young I.W.W. member with whom he has been traveling. “That was the last he saw of Ike Hall,” Dos Passos writes. It’s an immense country.

Everywhere in Mac's wanderings we are on ships or trains or in hotels or construction camps. We encounter railroad brakemen, prostitutes, printers, waitresses, etc., and see how they act and learn what they say. The same is true, in different forms, of the travels of many of the other characters. We have a Whitmanian sweep of the United States.

But where is the freedom Whitman idealized? Obvious vestiges of European feudalism disappeared here at about the time of the American Revolution. The United States is still a relatively free land for white men. But a now-predominating industrial capitalism wishes to erase opposition. Soldiers in Goldfield try to prevent I.W.W. agitators from entering the town during a miners' strike, and Mac pretends to be a book salesman to get in. Ben Compton is horribly beaten by sheriff's deputies in Everett, Washington, when the I.W.W. attempts to hold a meeting there. When the United States enters World War I—for Dos Passos a capitalist war—dissent against the conflict is punished fiercely.

Non-whites usually fare worse than economic radicals. Dos Passos' United States is a country dominated politically and economically by people of northern European origin. The Sacco-Vanzetti affair, which is important in the Mary French narrative and climactic in the "The Camera Eye" and "Newsreel," is the fullest and most dramatic illustration of ethnic persecution. And where in Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* are blacks and Mexicans? So far down in the nation's social hierarchy that they are noticeable mostly in the remarks of the "whites" (a category that doesn't include Italians and Hispanics).

In an early "Camera Eye" section, Dos Passos' mother tells him of her going to Mexico with the elder Dos Passos in a private railroad car before the boy was born. She was frightened by rifle shots fired from the back of the train. "But it was allright," she says, "turned out to be nothing but a little shooting they'd been only shooting a greaser that was all."

Doc, a heavy-drinking Floridian who converses with Charley Anderson on a boat from New Orleans to New York, says that he wants to get to France in a volunteer ambulance corps before the war goes bellyup. And when they have drunk two quarts of Bacardi—the narrative continues—"Doc was saying he didn't believe in white men shootin' each other up, only niggers, and started going round the boat lookin' for that damn shine steward to kill him just to prove it..."

But the non-radical "white" majority have stresses of their own. In most societies in history, people have performed the same work that their parents and grandparents did, and have had the same social status. A major fact about the United States that Dos Passos depicts is that this need not be so—and often cannot be so—here. Both Moorehouse and Stoddard are from working class families, and both are determined to be business successes. Margo

Dowling while in California buys, on payments, an old Rolls Royce displaying a coat of arms on it. Then with her husband acting as uniformed chauffeur, she sets out to impress people.

The point of the final piece in *U.S.A.*, “Vag,” is that the American dream of rising economically has become less and less realizable. While Vag thumbs for a ride on the road, he sees and hears a transcontinental airplane overhead. Dos Passos contrasts the starving Vag with a businessman passenger on the plane, who vomits his steak dinner into a carton.

The airplane in this final piece reminds us also that there is a history of transportation in the trilogy. In an early section of “The Camera Eye” we found Dos Passos traveling with his parents in a horse-drawn cab, and later, in a biography, we encountered Henry Ford mass producing the automobile.

A more general point is that twentieth century America is a country with rapidly changing technologies. When we last glimpse Margo Dowling, there is gossip that she doesn’t have a voice for talking pictures, and that her career is ending. Mac’s uncle Tim, a printer and ironically a socialist, buys a linotype machine; and an old German typesetter working for him says: “Fifty-five years a printer, and now when I’m old I’ll have to carry hods to make a living.” One of Dos Passos’ major themes in *U.S.A.* is that most American inventors have known and cared nothing about the social consequences of their inventions.

There is much that we might add about Dos Passos’ portrayal of the country. One subject would be the role of women. Typically, women make their way socially and economically through the favor of men; Janey Williams, Eleanor Stoddard, and Margo Dowling offer examples. What could be more significant about Dos Passos’ portrayal of public life and power from the 1890s through 1936 than the fact that only one biography of a woman appears in his trilogy?

Still another feature of Dos Passos’ United States, like many of the others a continuing feature, is immigration. Uncle Tim’s typesetter, Ben Compton’s parents, and Sacco and Vanzetti are a few of the immigrants. Millions of people have been entering in every decade—a fact that distinguishes the country, historically and sociologically, from almost any other. The United States which Dos Passos depicts, and which we still know today, is dynamic and ever-changing.

A huge place, three thousand miles across, with over a hundred million ethnically diverse people, seacoasts, lake shores, prairies, cities and villages, linked by railroads and highways—everywhere the particulars of hotels, bungalows, frame houses, restaurants—and everywhere the talk of the people. This ever-changing country is the chief character in the three books, and every human character, every place, every custom, every action, every word is an element in it.

Edmund Wilson's Journals

THE TWENTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1975.

THE THIRTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1980.

THE FORTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1983.

THE FIFTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1986.

THE SIXTIES: The Last Journal, 1960-1972. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Lewis M. Dabney. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1993.

If we judge critics by their range, knowledge, intelligence, standards, readability, and productivity, Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) is the most important critic in twentieth-century American literature. From 1943 on he published regularly in the *New Yorker*, where he had, for a literary critic, a large audience, most of them educated non-academics. During a career of over fifty years, he also published in *Vanity Fair*, the *Dial*, the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Partisan Review*, the *Nation*, the *Reporter*, and the *New York Review of Books*.

Drawing on his journals and his periodical articles, many of which were based on notes in the journals, he produced over a dozen volumes of criticism and journalistic essays. Among Wilson's most memorable books was *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931), which firmly established his reputation as a major literary critic. In it Wilson presented Symbolism as a literary movement and introduced and commented on the writings of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and others to a generation of readers. In *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (1940), he extended his range and demonstrated his intent to write intellectual history relevant to social and political concerns. Here he portrayed the background and growth of the Socialist idea in Europe, and showed its culmination in Lenin's arrival in Russia in 1917. In *The Wound and the Bow...* (1941), he linked the themes and achievements of a number of authors (e.g., Charles Dickens) with psychological traumas they had suffered.

Topics that he treated in his other works of non-fiction (he also wrote novels, plays, and poems) include hardships in the United States during the Great Depression; the devastated condition of Europe at the end of World War II; the Zuni, Haitian, Soviet Russian, and Israeli civilizations; Canadian culture; and the Dead Sea Scrolls. And, of course, works by indi-

vidual authors: Sophocles, George Bernard Shaw, Swinburne, Henry James, Flaubert, Malraux, Pushkin—the list could go on and on.

As a critic, he read a work in the original language—whether English, French, Russian, or Greek—and stressed the author's biography and the culture and history from which the work emerged. Wilson's prose was usually clear and unmannered, rarely calling attention to itself, and rarely, if ever, catchy. He did not coin tag terms and phrases, like Matthew Arnold's *Philistines* and "high seriousness" or T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative" and "dissociation of sensibility." Writing straightforward prose was a necessity for his journalistic career, but he sometimes employed traditional rhetoric memorably, as in this passage from his essay "T.S. Eliot and the Church of England" (1929). I quote from it partly because it furnishes an instance of his skill with traditional rhetoric, and partly because he used it to distinguish himself from a number of other American writers and critics:

Most Americans of the type of Dos Passos and Eliot—that is, sensitive and widely read literary people—have some such agreeable fantasy in which they can allow their minds to take refuge from the perplexities and oppressions about them. In the case of H.L. Mencken, it is a sort of German university town, where people drink a great deal of beer and devour a great many books, and where they respect the local nobility—if only the Germany of the Empire had not been destroyed by the war! In the case of certain American writers from the top layer of the old South, it is the old-fashioned Southern plantation, where men are high-spirited and punctilious and women gracious and lovely, where affectionate and loyal Negroes are happy to keep their place—if only the feudal South had not perished in 1865! With Ezra Pound, it is a medieval Provence, where poor but accomplished troubadours enjoy the favors of noble ladies—if only the troubadours were not deader than Provençal! With Dos Passos, it is an army of workers, disinterested, industrious and sturdy, but full of...good fellowship and gaiety...—if only the American workers were not preoccupied with buying Ford cars and radios, instead of organizing themselves to overthrow the civilization of the bourgeoisie! And in T.S. Eliot's case, it is a world of seventeenth-century churchmen, who combine the most scrupulous conscience with the ability to write good prose—if it were only not so difficult nowadays for men who are capable of becoming good writers to accept the Apostolic Succession!¹

In 1967 Wilson published *A Prelude: Landscapes, Characters, and Conversations from the Earlier Years of My Life*. There he wrote: "In the summer of 1914, I began keeping a notebook, which eventually turned into something like a journal.... [I] aimed to catch *sur le vif* things that struck me as significant or interesting."² *A Prelude* was followed by five posthumous volumes, each named for the decade it covers, and together running to 3,500

pages. The series began with *The Twenties* (1975) and concluded with *The Sixties* (1993). Wilson himself arranged for the publication of the journals, and edited parts of the first two volumes. After he died, his friend Leon Edel took over, completed their editing, and provided introductions; subsequently, Edel edited and wrote introductions to the next two volumes. Lewis M. Dabney, Wilson's biographer, edited *The Sixties*, also with an introduction.

The journals are relatively unstructured, usually undramatic, and often leisurely in pace. They have enough of the mundane about them to make us feel that we are being borne along in the stream of the writer's life.³ Sometimes they appeal to us intellectually, but they display many aspects of the man besides his intellect, e.g., his sexual impulses and activities, his dreams, his relations with his family, and his familiarity with and responses to flowers. Wilson's descriptions of his interactions with other writers are among the most intellectually exciting features of the journals. There are accounts of his Princeton college-friends F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Peale Bishop; of his lovers, among them Edna St. Vincent Millay, whom he met in Greenwich Village and with whom he had his first sexual intercourse; and of his numerous other friends from the Village and from Provincetown, Massachusetts. Wherever he was, he would meet authors about whom he wrote or might write—Santayana, James Branch Cabell, Faulkner, Max Beerbohm, W.H. Auden, D.S. Mirsky, Isaiah Berlin, S. Y. Agnon. His relations with such writers were varying mixtures of friendship and professionalism.

Each volume of the journals has its special interests and intensities, of which I can present only the minute, sometimes random, examples below:

In the twenties, he partied without stint. On a visit to Boston in 1927 during final efforts there to save Sacco and Vanzetti from execution, he was drinking and being convivial with friends, but feeling uneasy over the ironic coincidence. A passage of reminiscence about the decade, inserted when he was in his old age, states: "I could not really accept a life that had no aim except drinking and laughing."⁴

In the thirties, as a reporter for the *New Republic*, Wilson described factory conditions in Detroit and industrial warfare in Harlan County, Kentucky, a coal mining region. He declared that he would vote for the Communist candidates in the presidential election of 1932.

In the forties, he traveled to Europe for the *New Yorker* to report on the end of the war, and in his journal complained about Allied savagery in the bombing of Berlin.

In the fifties he studied the Iroquois' national movement in northern New York. Of these Native Americans, he wrote: "One must realize that they have the conviction and the courage of a once independent people who have been decimated and pushed into a corner by an alien and unscrupulous race."⁵

In the sixties, he received garlands of recognition for his career. (Not having filed income tax returns for years, he also received heavy assessments from the IRS.) One award, in June 1968, was \$30,000 from the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies for his contribution to American culture. At the dinner for the presentation, the wife of the president of the Institute, seated beside Wilson, asked him, "You wrote *Finlandia*, didn't you?"⁶

Wilson was born into an upper-middle-class family with deep roots in the northeastern United States. His maternal ancestors came to New England from England in the seventeenth century, and his paternal ancestors were among the earliest settlers in central New York State. His mother's father graduated from Hamilton College, in New York, and practiced medicine in New Jersey, and his father's father graduated from Amherst College and Princeton Theological Seminary and became a Presbyterian minister in the same state. Edmund Wilson's father went to Exeter, Princeton College, and Columbia Law School, then practiced law in New Jersey and became attorney general there. Wilson himself went to Hill School, forty miles from Philadelphia, and then on to Princeton.

At Princeton Wilson was greatly influenced by Christian Gauss, a notable professor of French and Italian, who became a lifelong friend. In August 1920 he wrote of Gauss, in a poem which appears in *The Twenties*:

I heard him speak of books and politics and people,
 With his incredible learning and his cloudless mind,
 But he was really talking of life...
 A last champion of man's divine pride of reason and imagination...
 I was swearing again an oath I had many times sworn already:
 That, so long as I should live, I should honor nothing but Gauss.... (61)

In August 1917, a year after Wilson graduated from college, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private, and did hospital service in France, and then—after his father arranged a transfer, and promotion to sergeant for him—intelligence service in France and Germany. Soon after returning from the war he settled in New York and began free-lance writing. Then, in 1920, Wilson became managing editor at *Vanity Fair*. After leaving that magazine in February 1921, he took an editorial job with the *New Republic*.

He was in Europe in the summer of 1921, having gone to Paris in hope of winning Edna St. Vincent Millay. While there he saw the American poet Djuna Barnes, who was living in the city. Over three decades later, writing in *The Fifties*, Wilson said that Barnes had once attacked him for insisting that American writers should live in their own country. Life was much pleasanter in Paris, she said. Why shouldn't the writers live there? "I realize," Wilson

said in another passage in *The Fifties*, “how much—unconsciously—the determination to make something out of America must have biased me against what was really good in Europe: attractively built cities, good and quiet manners, appetizing food, respect for the arts, and—in Paris, at any rate—feminine chic” (392).

To make something out of America! Thomas Jefferson could have employed some such phrase. So too could Walt Whitman, whom Wilson in *The Forties* called America’s greatest writer (152). But Wilson in his later years clearly disliked mainstream American culture. He saw life in American cities and towns as “no longer exciting but rather repellent” (*Fifties*, 392). Probably while he was in Paris he wrote in his journal for 1956: “I begin for the first time to be able sympathetically to enter into the feelings of the Americans of an earlier generation who chose to live in Europe. Yet an American, except to a limited extent or in the case of some special situation, has no business here” (392).

He had inherited a house in Talcottville, in rustic northern New York State, in 1951. Spending his summers there, he thought often of an earlier America, where there had been a relatively educated and cultured upper class. “Today,” he wrote in his autobiographical volume *Upstate*, “every young American enjoys the inalienable right to enroll at a state university and, as soon as he pleases, drop out. Negro and white children both may go all the way through primary school without ever learning to read.”⁷

Continually amid Wilson’s observations and thoughts, he gives details of his experiences with liquor and sex. He began drinking in Greenwich Village in 1920, and was a heavy drinker through the rest of his life. In 1967 he wrote of having about a pint of whisky a night. Drinking could make him quarrelsome, and it took its toll of his constitution, but it did not prevent him from writing.

One is startled by the details about his sexual life with wives, mistresses, and prostitutes. He gives accounts of his adulteries, of his seductions and attempted seductions of female acquaintances, and of his conjugal performances. In 1946, after Wilson and his third wife, Mary McCarthy, separated, he seduced Elena Thornton, a married woman with a fourteen-year-old son, and won her as his fourth. Though the two had an excellent marriage in most ways, he hurt her with his adulteries and attempted adulteries late in life. And in the journals Wilson recorded vivid play-by-play accounts of his sexual acts with her.

Violating a book bothered him more than violating a marriage. In *The Twenties* he tells about an outrage that Frank Crowninshield, the editor of *Vanity Fair*, committed. Crowninshield, needing the text of one of Voltaire’s letters, borrowed a volume of a beautifully printed and costly edition of Voltaire from Putnam’s bookstore, located beneath the *Vanity Fair* offices. He then cut out the pages he wanted and returned the volume, confident

that Putnam's would not discover the mutilation. For Wilson this was "the most shocking thing I ever knew him to do—an incident that I never quite got over" (43). Wilson was entirely true to only one mistress—literature.

HERE IS THE WHOLE MAN!—this is the implicit message of the journal. And this is ultimately why the journal is important. Critic that he was, Wilson knew that in literature truth is the only legitimate currency; furthermore, his thinking was strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud's work on human motivation. But why all the physical details and the terms *cock*, *cunt*, etc.? For Wilson they were the naked truth. Humans, individually and collectively, were fundamentally animals.

Wilson in *The Sixties*, at age 72, wrote: "That all this fuss should be made about getting one's penis into a woman—filling people with rapture and despair and stimulating them to all kinds of heroisms and excesses" (642).

He had similar recourse to natural history when he explained human wars in his preface to *Patriotic Gore*:

Everything, past, present and future, takes its place in the legend of American idealism.... This prevents us from recognizing today, in our relation to our cold-war opponent, that our panicky pugnacity as we challenge him is not virtue but at bottom the irrational instinct of an active power organism in the presence of another such organism, of a sea slug of vigorous voracity in the presence of another such sea slug.⁸

An experience that Wilson records in *The Thirties* shows him bothered by the paradox posed by man's animal nature. Probably his description of the experience provides a key to understanding how he saw both himself and his work:

My hand on a book—At Stamford [Connecticut] one day, when I had long been absorbed in reading and writing, I looked at my hand on the page of the book I was reading and suddenly saw it as an animal's paw with the fingers lengthened to claws and become prehensile for climbing around, in strange, in incredible contrast to the detached and limitless life of the mind: that was what we were, we still carried with us those animal paws, those were what we had to work with: stubby fingers with nails at the service of the dreaming horizonless mind: a shock to me then in my detached and dreaming literary life. (660-61)

He was an animal, he believed, but also more than an animal. Passages on his relationships with Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elena, and Margaret Canby (his second wife, who died in 1932) show considered and, in differing ways, complicated relationships. But his major exploits in going beyond the animal, as the last quotation indicates, were through thinking

and writing. His references in his journals to Negroes and Jews show him rejecting animalistic dominance based on force.

In Wilson's *The Thirties*, in entries through 1932, he used the term *nigger* for Negro over ten times, and the term *coon* once. His uses do not seem to be due to an attempt to satirize contemporary practice. Nothing in their context shows them to be anything but his own way of expressing himself in the privacy of his journals.⁹ But writing in *The Forties*, from a hotel in Port-au-Prince in 1949, he reflected on the effects of the characteristic treatment of Negroes in the United States:

I am very much impressed with the Haitians. You have only to see them to realize what a wretched life we have made for the Negroes in the States. The Haitians with whom I traveled on the plane and the officials who handled the passengers at the airport were entirely different from our Negroes. It is not merely that they are quick and polite but that they have no consciousness of inferiority—so that their faces and bearing are different. I went out for a walk yesterday afternoon and got the same impression from the ordinary people on the streets.

(318)

References to Jews are frequent in the journals. Almost everyone who is Jewish is referred to as being so, however extraneous his or her being Jewish would seem to be to the immediate situation. What with Jews' features, gestures, intensity, curiosity, activism, and self-consciousness, they were not "like yourself"—an expression he used in 1932.¹⁰

Wilson, in editing parts of *The Twenties*, interpolated a passage he labeled "my moment of anti-Semitism." He was trying to win over a young woman, Katze, in 1926, but could never separate her completely from her friend Franz. Finally he told her that he thought she and Franz were both Jewish. She answered that his remark was in bad taste. Wilson, in commenting on the "moment," wrote that he had no reason to believe that they were Jewish; even if he had known they were, that would not have helped him with Katze. "I am not at all proud of this....," he added. "I regard it as an example of the way in which a purely superstitious idea—that the Jews were responsible for executing Jesus—instilled into one's unconscious, may irrationally influence behavior" (300).

Wilson's recollection demonstrates that he came to confront a deeply based prejudice with reason. In *The Thirties*, despite his seeing Jews as in varying degrees alien, he was annoyed by the anti-Semitism he encountered. Hitler's anti-Jewish activities, he wrote in March 1933, seemed to be affecting social relations in New York City, encouraging "latent anti-Semitism" and giving people "courage to be impolite" (328). When at a family Christ-

mas party in 1933, one of Wilson's uncles talked about the power of Jews in Germany before Hitler and complained about the strong presence of Jews in Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, Wilson answered that the Nazis' persecution of Jews was "a terrible thing" (411). In 1937 Wilson, visiting Christian Gauss, who had become Dean at Princeton, noted that "in connection with his duties, he had succumbed to some of the stupidities of Princeton: signs of anti-Semitism..." (698).

Much later, while participating in the Christian Gauss memorial seminars at Princeton in 1952-53, Wilson studied Hebrew at the Princeton Theological Seminary. In the spring of 1954, he went to Israel to learn about the Dead Sea Scrolls, and he was there again in the spring of 1967. "In the 1960s," Dabney writes, "he tacked up in his study the words *hazak, hazak, venit-hazayk* at the end of the Torah—'Be strong, be strong, let us make ourselves strong,' was Wilson's translation. He sometimes used the phrase as a grace over the orange juice at breakfast, telling this writer that it helped him 'jack up my waning powers.'"¹¹

One sees in Wilson's dealings with ethnic prejudices examples of the strong links between his intellectual, moral, and literary development. These journals abound in material to help fill out the picture of his *Bildung*. Wilson worked hard at his writing to the end of his life; it had become his *raison d'être*. But, despite his relatively wide audience, he did not believe that his "determination to make something out of America" had met with visible success. "Are not my literary activities..." he asked in the Epilogue to *Upstate*, "clumsy gestures in the interest of ends that can only be reached...in the course of innumerable centuries that are now entirely unimaginable?"¹²

Notes

1. Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York, 1952), 439-40.

2. Wilson, *A Prelude: Landscapes, Characters, and Conversations from the Earlier Years of My Life* (New York, 1967), 1.

3. Sometimes we are stranded on sandbars. Edel's editing of the first four volumes is deficient, although he furnishes some excellent biographical and critical commentary on Wilson. Again and again, one finds no identifications of people Wilson discusses or mentions. Dabney did better with identifications in *The Sixties*, providing a glossary of names at the end of the volume. Given the situation, the reader would do well to consult Dabney's glossary while reading Edel's volumes. He or she would also do well to read a current biography of Wilson before going through all five volumes. A helpful one, by Jeffrey Meyers—*Edmund Wilson: A Biography* (Boston)—appeared in 1995, and Dabney has long been working on what I expect will be a fuller and more critical one.

4. Wilson, *The Twenties*, 173.

5. Wilson, *The Fifties*, 467.

6. Wilson, *The Sixties*, 716.

7. Wilson, *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York* (New York, 1971), 379-80.

8. Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, 1962), xxxi-xxxii.

9. I did not notice any use of the pejorative terms in the later volumes. Of course, all five volumes have been edited. I have not read them in Wilson's original notebooks and diaries.

10. Wilson, *The Thirties*, 174.

11. Lewis M. Dabney, Introduction to *The Portable Edmund Wilson* (New York, 1983), xxxiii-xxxiv.

12. Wilson, *Upstate*, 385.

Tch Tch

I'll begin by translating the title from what I expect to be the new American English. Our title translated is "Noah Webster's Last Stand." Webster (1758–1843) was "for many years the chief American authority on English." I have this from the *Columbia Encyclopedia* by my desk. It tells me that pioneers on the frontier taught their children to read from his *Elementary Spelling Book* and that in schools it was a textbook and a source for spelling matches. In 1828 he published *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which listed 70,000 words and helped to standardize pronunciation in the country. Sales of his dictionary reached 300,000 a year, and the *Elementary Spelling Book* was selling a million copies a year by 1850.

That was one hundred and eleven years before I first came to a certain midwestern university. Every day after I taught my classes in 1961–62, I passed the Law School on my way to lunch. And there thirty to fifty law students would be sitting on the stairs of the school's massive porch, waiting for attractive women to walk by. As they did, the law students showered them with wolf whistles—"whu-Whoo, whu-Whoo." At the time I thought this a study in oafishness, not linguistics.

There were other sounds that I didn't ponder linguistically. During a football game, hundreds, perhaps thousands, were shouting "rah! rah!" in the stadium. As I walked by, I would often hear "awwww" from thousands of throats, following an incomplete pass or a missed field goal. Less often I would hear an immense "yaaaaay."

A few years after I arrived, a professor of psychology told me about a paper he had written on sub-verbal communication. A person talking to another on the telephone needs reassurance that his listener is still there. There is no need for continual verbal response, but there is for a periodic "ah-ha" or "mm-hm" or "mmm"; a speaker failing to hear some such sound will stop and await a signal that the other is still on the line. I confess that for a long time I didn't think of applying the professor's study to salvaging what we could of the American language, though the need was growing.

In my early years, the college tried to make certain that every graduating student was literate. There were remedial freshman English courses—now abandoned for lack of funding—and writing teachers who failed students for good cause received clear assurances of support from their department. Still, juniors and seniors sometimes wrote with unacceptable

organization, diction, phrasing, grammar, punctuation, etc. Sometimes they forgot what they had learned in English; sometimes they were transfer students; and sometimes they thought that correct writing was for composition classes only. As a safeguard, the university required graduating seniors to pass a writing proficiency examination. All professors in the college were required to grade bundles of papers. If two professors passed a paper, the student was deemed proficient. If one passed but another failed the paper, it went to a third to break the tie.

Some faculty outside the English Department complained that they did not know how to grade the papers. Others were sure that they did, but they did not. One professor, for example, cared about nothing but misspellings. There was talk of English teachers grading all the papers. But the English Department said no, thanks—they had much else to do. As all seniors resented the proficiency test, that was the end of it.

Today as I teach English, I look back with nostalgia to the time of that examination. It was, along with serious freshman and sophomore English courses, a bulwark against illiteracy—but the bulwark fell. Then came grade inflation and reliance on student evaluations of teachers for their salary adjustments. Reading some of the evaluations today, I find comments such as: “He grades us on our words, not our ideas.” One wants to demand—what ideas?—but the evaluations are anonymous; besides, posing such a question would be considered brutalizing the student. Frequently a student will complain that a D or F will prevent him from entering the School of Education or the School of Journalism; moreover, he will say that his former English teachers gave him A’s or B’s. Ipso facto, the present teacher is a menace to society.

I write about my university because I know it best, but the problem with American English is widespread. During the crisis with Iran in 1979-80, I was on sabbatical leave doing research at the University of Virginia. Iranian militants seized the U.S. embassy in Teheran, made hostages of the diplomats and employees, and held them over a year. While the captives’ ordeal dragged on and on, the Charlottesville *Daily Progress* published an article about the strain on their families, under the headline—“HOSTAGES’ FAMILIES TIRESOME.”

Early in my teaching career, I would analyze, during class exercises, textbook illustrations of dangling participles such as: “Coming through a hole in the floor, my nose smelled smoke.” A howler for mixed figurative language was: “The hand that rocked the cradle kicked the bucket.” At the University of Washington in 1960, I remember discussing with two students, in individual conferences, their sentences: “Sailing in Lake Washington isn’t my cup of tea,” and “I left the business world because I couldn’t stand the dog-eat-dog rat race.” Most of the students back then seemed to find such matters relevant to their desire for

an education. Today, at least at my school, most do not think learning to write competently is worth their effort.

Last year I explained to a C student in a drama class that one way to improve her vocabulary was to look up the definition of any unfamiliar word she encountered. If she came upon the word several times, she should put it in a list to review. A way to improve her grammar and punctuation, I added, was to study appropriate topics in textbooks. When I offered to lend her one, she recoiled and cried out, "I'm only nineteen and have more important things to do." I hope she doesn't become a newspaper editor.

I refer to her as a "C" student. She merits a D, but lobbies for a B —the average grade now— and often gets it. It is politically impossible to give D's and F's to more than a handful of students in an English class, even if they are illiterate. To do so would lead to queries from legislators, regents, and the dean. In this era of TV, flaunting nudity may be castigated, but flaunting ignorance (e.g., defining *syntax* as a tax on whorehouses), never. Realistically, we must alter our expectations. If the mountain won't come to the prophet, the prophet must go to the mountain.

Instead of Noah Webster's 70,000 words, we can settle on five hundred which we will expect every student to know. Inevitably, huge numbers of words will disappear, but we will preserve American English in some form. Our five hundred words will be mostly monosyllabic ones that we are already using. Consider the words *hah*, *ma*, *pa*, *rah*, *waah*. If we seek out words with a long "a," we get *lay*, *pay*, *say*. Going through the various vowel sounds in the same manner, we find such useful terms as *he*, *me*, *pee*, *see*, *she*, *we* (to minimize grammar, we will dispense with *us*, as well as *him* and *her*). *Buy*, *die*, *hi*. *Dough* (for money), *go*, *toe*. *Moo* (to use if you want to buy a hamburger), and perhaps *sue* (for pre-law students). Usually we will simplify spellings; some of the above words will become *ha*, *ra*, *do*, and *soo*.

In addition there will be the recognizable grunts, cries, squeals, and exclamations—a wealth of them, all of which will be preserved. It is hard to represent them in print, because their meanings sometimes depend on pitch and duration. Thus "a-ha" means that the person has gotten your point. But "a-haaah," with the second syllable high-pitched and rising, means that he is delighted to have gotten it. A low-pitched "mmm" is a pensive sound, but a high-pitched "mmmm" is an serenade in appreciation of Mom's apple pie. To convey the sounds correctly we will have to publish our *New American Dictionary* on a multi-media disk.

Let us look at an example of new American English in action. We shall pretend that it takes place at the Univerity of Missouri, but it could be at any of the Big Twelve universities.

Instructor, to four students: "Y u MU?" (Why are you at the University of Missouri?)

First student: "Do." (to learn to make money)

Second student: "Ra, ra." (to participate in the athletic program)

Third student: "Woo! woo!" (to live it up sexually)

Fourth student: "Woo." (to find a suitor and get married)

Third student (edging away from the fourth student): "Uh-o!"

Second student (enjoying the third's discomfiture): "Ha-ha."

First student (annoyed at the others' frivolity): "Ugh!"

Though I composed this example as a dramatic piece, I do not mean to imply that the *New American Dictionary* will lead to formidable plays. But it will keep us more verbal than the yap-yaps, bas, and moos on the farm. Remember, this is Noah Webster's last stand.